

Solution-Focused Coaching - *Stop the why*

'Why' is an instinctive question. Asked 100's of times every day in organizations, and much of it is helpful. It is important to understand why a manufacturing process has failed, why a car broke down or why your fire alarm went off. It can be enlightening to see why people behave a certain way.

However, it can only reinforce the problem and leave us knowing what went wrong without knowing what went right. Also, the 'why' we have identified is, perhaps, something we can do nothing or little to change.

Example...Frank needs Aamani to complete her audit reports accurately and on time.

'Why' asked to Frank

1. Why isn't Aamani completing the reports correctly and on time? *She is resistant because she feels that I single her out for the reports being late.*
2. Why does she feel you single her out for the reports being late? *Because I got the job, she feels she should have, and she can control this part of her work.*
3. Why is she controlling this part of her work? *So she can make me look bad in front of my supervisor, and she can feel better about not getting the promotion.*
4. Why does she want you to look bad in front of your supervisor? *She feels she should have my job and could do better than me.*
5. Why does she want your job and feel she can do better than you? *Because she is a vengeful person, who is insecure and needs to play power games!*

WOW! Root-cause found.

That did not end well, it reinforced the problem, lead to something that is not actionable; the reports are still late and inaccurate, plus Frank and Aamani have no idea what to do besides be mad at each other.

What? How? When? Where?

An alternative to asking why is asking a series of what, how, when, where questions. Below are several scenarios and sample questions.

What - Leadership Coaching Questions

- An employee tells you they are losing control and the project will be late. Rather than asking 'why' - which will move the work onto your task list - you ask a series of 'what' coaching questions.

| Question | Purpose |
|--|---|
| What is happening that you want to change? | To gain an understanding that a problem exists and that the person wants to do something different. |
| What will you (or the team) be doing when this problem is solved? | Framing areas of focus that can be measured and defined as progress-steps |
| What is the current condition? | Create an agreement on the current status and environment. |
| What have you done that has worked? | Discover awareness of what resources the person already has |
| What has the team (or other person) done that has worked? | Discover current team and other person resources |
| What is your next small step or experiment? | Define some particular area of progress and, from the discussion, build efficacy through effort |
| What will you do differently? | Accept the thinking that repeating the same effort over and over will gain similar results. Defining some different steps will make progress. |
| What decisions do you have to make? What decisions does the team (or other person) have to make? | Creating a scope of decision making and better understanding what accountability and authority are needed. |
| What competing priorities support your progress or cause regress? | Understanding how other priorities of the work will help or hinder progress. |
| What risks have you considered? What risks has the team (or other person) considered? | Begin mapping personal and other person/ team risks so that they can be accounted for in the effort |
| What do you expect to happen when taking your next progress step? | Agree on areas of accountability and authority. Share in the ambiguity of learning and management. |

How - Leadership Coaching Questions

- Your best project manager comes to you to help with personality clashes. They share how strong personalities are getting in the way of work, and asks for your advice on how to fix this dysfunctional team. Rather than asking why - which will move the work onto your plate - ask a series of 'how' coaching questions.

| Question | Purpose |
|---|---|
| How are these clashes causing a slowdown in work? | To frame the challenge in a way that can be discussed |
| How often are you noticing these clashes? | To look at how often. Is this a limited time thing, or an every time thing. |
| How often are others coming to you to discuss or complain about the clashes? | Explore how often others may be noticing. Also to understand the size of the challenge |
| How well does the team know why it is working together? How are they accountable for the team goal? How their work will be evaluated and appraised? | To determine how the essential elements of team performance are known. Also, to move the person to explore process as opposed to personal challenges. |
| How have you managed to complete the many tasks the team has already achieved? | Bring attention to what they have done that is successful as opposed to what is not working. |
| How can you do more of what you shared that is working? | Draw a connection between past success and current progress |
| How will you notice that progress is being made? | Identify progress clues and support them to change how the work is done |
| How will you increase what is already working well enough with the team? | Show that challenges are a two-sided option. The one hand is resistance, and the other is cooperation. |

When - Leadership Coaching questions

- A staff member comes to you to share that they are no longer fulfilled with their current work, and would like change. Rather than asking a series of 'why questions' you ask the following 'when questions.'

| Question | Purpose |
|--|--|
| When, during your workday, do you feel fulfilled - even a little bit? | Work with the person to identify what they are doing that currently works. |
| When do you find yourself looking for engaging work? | Discover times that the individual can accept and change how work gets done. |
| When you speak with your coworkers about your job, what would they notice is different when you are fulfilled? | Reframe to have the person look outside themselves to discover progress clues. |
| When during your day can seek work that challenges you and makes you feel fulfilled? | Look for times and opportunities for the person to take accountability plus authority over their work. |
| When you find work that is meaningful what changes? | Anchor context about useful change |
| When can we meet again and discuss what work you believe fulfills you and how you made progress? | Develop an agreement for development and time to meet again. |

Where Leadership Coaching Questions

- A team member comes to you asking for guidance on prioritizing their work, of course, you have a pile of work to complete. Instead of asking a series of 'why' they cannot prioritize, you ask 'where.'

| Question | Purpose |
|---|---|
| Where do you find ease in managing your current workload? | Identify the challenge and what's working |
| Where is the simplest area to begin prioritizing? | Choose a progress step to start |
| Where in your day do you find the time, even just a little bit, to define the strategy of your work? | Discovering exceptions and seeing how they occur |
| Where is the work that you can complete the quickest? | Re-framing progress steps |
| Where is the work that you can let go of? | Determining what to stop doing |
| Where can you find whose work it is to complete? | Examining the project or work goals to determine what is needed |
| Where are you leveraging the work to create a greater return on your time? | Understand what's working and how to frame next steps |
| Where can you complete less than perfect quality work because the goals, at this time, do not require perfection? | Understanding what is needed within the work and what is too much |
| Where will you notice a difference when you prioritize differently? | Identifying a difference to start |
| Where are you already seeing this difference? | Using current resources to define priority |
| Where did that difference come from? Where can you do more of that? | Decision and progress steps |

Asking why will reinforce your power as a manager. However, it will not make your work any easier. Slowing down to ask a series of What, How, When, Where questions will enhance the team's output, and add value to the team's decision-making and problem-solving. All of which makes you a better leader and the team a learning team.

